

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Muriel Tomer, and I am the Chairperson of the PAIMI Council of Connecticut. The PAIMI Council stands for Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness, and it is mandated by Federal Statute to be the Advisory Council to the Office of Protection and Advocacy (OPA) for persons with disabilities under the PAIMI Act.

I am testifying this evening, because I am gravely concerned about House Bill 5016, the Governor's proposal to consolidate the OPA with the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO). I feel both as the Chair of the PAIMI Council, and as an individual, that this proposal will have long-lasting negative impact on the people who live with disabilities in Connecticut.

People with disabilities all over Connecticut need to have an independent and authoritative advocate to protect them when they request OPA's help.

If OPA and CHRO are made one, in the way that Governor Malloy has proposed, then our citizens with disabilities will become un-protected, have no source of independent advocacy and investigation, and will have nowhere else to go to receive these critical services.

If you allow the Executive Director of the newly proposed Department of Human Rights, Protection, and Advocacy to have final authority over administrative and fiscal responsibilities of OPA, *that* will effectively negate the OPA's advocacy, abuse, and investigatory functions, as well as create even more bureaucracy in our government.

People with disabilities do not have time for bureaucracy, and they desperately need, and are federally mandated, to have dedicated and unhindered access to the OPA's available resources to help them.

We are running a Change.org petition to oppose House Bill 5016. Citizens from across the United States are signing it, including Executive Directors from OPA's and PAIMI Council Chairpeople in other states. As of today, we have almost 500 signatures, and will continue to recruit signatures until House Bill 5016 it dies. We are also getting signatures from other parts of the world, as people are taking notice of what is going on in Connecticut regarding services for people with disabilities. We are publicizing this proposal all over the United States, because we want people to know what is happening here. What is happening is not positive, and it does not reflect well on our state.

Here is a petition comment from Laurie B., a Connecticut Resident: and I quote:

"Gov. Malloy,

Please don't tamper with OPA's ability to serve the needs of Connecticut's residents with disabilities. They need an independent agency devoted to advocacy and protection of their rights. Even with limited, and further dwindling, financial resources, OPA has successfully championed the rights of the disabled.

Will the merger of OPA & CHRO result in any bona fide savings in the budget? If so, at whose expense? The answer should be obvious: persons with disabilities are the biggest losers in this game and, BTW, there are no winners."

Please do not allow House Bill 5016 to become law. Protect the rights of people with disabilities throughout the State of Connecticut by allowing the OPA to remain an independent advocate for people with disabilities.

Thank you for allowing me to testify.